

# Erie County Taxpayer Newsletter



Volume 3, Issue 1

January 2010

## From County Executive Chris Collins



For too long, many people in this area have been feeling down about Western New York. I've always maintained that the only people who don't know how great our area is are the people who've never been here, or the ones who've never left.

We have an embarrassment of riches in Erie County. We have world class art and cultural institutions to be proud of. We're home to numerous first rate higher education institutions. Our architecture is unparalleled. This is a great place to live, work and raise a family.

My administration has been working hard to ensure that we re-brand our region. We're trying to spread the word across the nation that Buffalo is a great place to live, work and visit.

The Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitor's Bureau is the driving force behind this effort. I'm thrilled that Dottie Gallagher-Cohen recently accepted the job of President and CEO, and will start at the CVB on January 25<sup>th</sup>. Drew Cerza has done a wonderful job as interim president.

Additionally, Fox 29 and MyTV Buffalo recently launched a "Be Buffalo" campaign to highlight reasons to feel good about living in Western New York. I'm happy to be a part of this campaign, and was privileged to help them launch the campaign on "Road to a Bright Future with Chris Collins".

We as Western New Yorkers must take pride in our heritage and our wealth of attributes. We'll be showcasing our area on a national and international stage in the coming year as we host part of the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament this spring and again when we welcome the World Junior Hockey Championships to Buffalo in December.

I urge all of you to think about what you like about Western New York, and to spread that message to your family and friends around the nation. Image changing starts at home. We can all take part in revitalizing Western New York as we look toward a bright future.

## Contact the County Executive

Office: 95 Franklin St., 16th Floor, Buffalo, NY 14202

Phone: (716) 858-8500, E-mail: [public\\_feedback@erie.gov](mailto:public_feedback@erie.gov)

## Erie County a Leader in Administering H1N1 Vaccine

According to the New York State Department of Health, Erie County has administered **84,547** doses of the H1N1 vaccine to date. That's more doses than any other County outside of New York City.

Erie County's Health Commissioner, Dr. Anthony Billittier, says the accomplishment was made possible by planning, hard work and a collaborative approach. Dr. Billittier says about 300 physician practices and other healthcare providers in Erie County helped coordinate vaccination efforts with the County. These providers enrolled in the County's system, and were preferentially provided vaccine so they could vaccinate their patients. Once those providers appeared to have enough vaccine, the County Health Department began to extend vaccination opportunities in schools, the Walden Galleria and other community sites in full partnership with local emergency managers, schools, the SMART team and other community entities.

Dr. Billittier said, "Our efforts to administer this vaccine continue in our community because doses remain plentiful and the citizens of Erie County are still seeking vaccination. I'd like to offer my sincere thanks to all of those who have made this large scale vaccination effort possible. I'm proud of our County Health Department for a job well done."

"Our County Health Department, led by Dr. Anthony Billittier, continues to excel at handling emergency situations," said Erie County Executive Chris Collins. "This is a testament to Dr. Billittier's leadership, and our hard working County employees."

A list of Erie County H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccine clinics is available at [www.erie.gov/health](http://www.erie.gov/health).

## County, ECMCC Reach Major Financial Settlement

*Plan settles lawsuit, while providing assurances for taxpayers*

The Board of Directors of Erie County Medical Center Corporation (ECMCC) and Erie County Executive Chris Collins announced that the board unanimously approved an historic financial settlement reached between Erie County and the health system.



The agreement, which settles a lawsuit ECMCC filed in 2005, resolves and clearly defines the county's future financial obligations to ECMCC, providing assurances for hospital leadership and county taxpayers.

Under terms of the agreement, the county's annual operating funding to ECMCC will be \$16.2 million, as long as ECMCC remains a public benefit corporation. The 2005 lawsuit left that issue unresolved and could have resulted in county budget uncertainty in 2010 and beyond.

The centerpiece of the new agreement involves building a replacement for the current Erie County Home in Alden. The plan calls for a new facility on ECMCC's Grider Street Campus at a cost of approximately \$105 million that will replace the currently outdated buildings. In addition to shifting jobs to Buffalo, the new facility will add development to the city's East Side.

Also as part of the settlement, ECMCC agreed to reduce the county's current capital obligation to ECMCC from \$23 million to \$11.5 million and earmark it toward construction of the new facility on Grider Street. ECMCC will continue to pay the bond debt incurred when the public benefit corporation was established in 2004.

The settlement agreement includes the transfer of buildings and land between the County and ECMCC. The parties have agreed to trade ownership of certain buildings on the Grider Street Campus and to demolish eight currently unused structures to make way for future development. After construction of the new Erie County Home, the county will retake ownership of the Alden building. The Erie County Legislature needs to approve the agreement.

Finally, the parties reached agreement on retirement liability for employees at ECMCC. The issue involved ECMCC's creation as a public benefit corporation in 2004 and the determination of who was responsible for retirement liability of employees hired when the county ran the system prior to 2004. The agreement focused on the retirement of employees, rather than the hiring dates of employees. The settlement agreement determines that the retirement liability of employees who retired prior to Jan. 1, 2004 is the responsibility of the county and the retirement liability of employees who retired after Jan. 1, 2004 is the responsibility of ECMCC.

"This settlement agreement is a win for this community in countless ways," said County Executive Chris Collins. "For taxpayers, it assures a fixed subsidy and defined capital investment for ECMCC, taking a financial unknown off the table and allowing the county to accurately budget and plan for years to come. For ECMCC, it provides an appropriate subsidy in recognition of ECMCC's growing obligation to care for our community's most vulnerable citizens."

"For our aging population, the settlement agreement dedicates funding toward building a new nursing home with a mission of providing skilled nursing care to indigent seniors," continued Collins. "And for the future of health care in Western New York, it allows ECMCC to move forward with its plans to build Centers of Excellence in Orthopedics and Organ Transplants, improving the level of medical care in our community."

"As ECMCC works to create a new pre-eminent health care system with Kaleida and Great Lakes Health, this agreement brings financial certainty that will help us plan for better health care for our patients," said ECMCC CEO Jody Lomeo. "I want to also commend the ECMCC Board, because as a taxpayer I too am pleased that we can bring funding certainty to our county government when it comes to ECMCC as it continues to serve Erie County's residents."

The settlement emerged after Collins appointed a panel late in 2008 to agree on county-ECMCC issues that needed resolution. The panel met, identified the issues, and sought to have counsel for the respective parties conduct negotiations. ECMCC counsel Anthony J. Colucci III and Erie County Attorney Cheryl Green negotiated the agreement with direction from the County Executive and ECMCC leadership. Toward the end of the process, Collins and Lomeo met to compromise on larger issues in the agreement. The ECMCC board approved the 17-page agreement in late December.



## Toboggan Runs Re-Open at Chestnut Ridge Park

*Chutes running for the first time in five years*

Erie County Executive Chris Collins, County Parks Commissioner Jim Hornung and Legislator John Mills announced that the toboggan runs at Chestnut Ridge Park re-opened on Saturday, January 9<sup>th</sup>. The newly reconstructed chutes will be open to the public on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Friday nights from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. Plans are also in place to open the toboggan runs by reservation on Wednesdays for school field trips or corporate outings.

The toboggan runs were originally built in the early 1930's at Chestnut Ridge. The chutes have been closed for the past five years, and were reconstructed over the past several months. Toboggan runs like these are now extremely rare around the nation.

Erie County Executive Chris Collins said, "Opening these toboggan runs is a quality of life issue for Western New Yorkers. It's a sign that our County parks are once again healthy. Generations of families have enjoyed these chutes for nearly 80 years. We're happy to make them available to a new generation for recreation and good exercise."

"I'm thrilled that the County is able to bring back this great recreational outlet here in Orchard Park," said Erie County Legislator John Mills. "These chutes are a rare treasure that will surely attract visitors from across Western New York during the winter season."

Parks Commissioner Jim Hornung said, "Our County parks staff is thrilled to welcome local families back to these great attractions. We built a special groomer for the toboggan hill to prepare for the season ahead. I'm proud of our staff for making this announcement a reality."

Re-opening the chutes is part of the Collins' administration's master plan to restore the County parks. Reconstructing the toboggan runs cost slightly less than \$200,000 and was paid for through the County's capital bond funding. Construction was completed by a contractor.

At this point, anyone using the chutes will need to bring their own toboggan, and **only wooden toboggans are allowed**. The County is looking into buying toboggans to rent out at a future date. To reserve the toboggan runs at Chestnut Ridge for your school or business, call (716) 858-7037. More information is available at [www.erie.gov/parks](http://www.erie.gov/parks).



*Legislator John Mills, County Executive Collins and Parks Commissioner Jim Hornung cut the ribbon on the toboggan runs.*



*Photo of the original toboggan runs taken in 1931.*



*Cars in the Chestnut Ridge parking lot, circa 1930.*

New Civil Service announcements with the last filing dates up to **February 6, 2010** are now available on the County's website.

Please see:

<http://www.erie.gov/employment/index.asp>

or call the Erie Co. Civil Service Exam Line at **716-858-8729**.



## Erie County Public Works Looks Back on 2009 Accomplishments

Erie County's Public Works Commissioner, Jerry Sentz, says his department enjoyed a very successful year in 2009, and he looks forward to more success this year.

Sentz notes that the Public Works Department completed more than \$10 million in County road projects. They included nearly 100 miles of oil and chip surfacing, about 20 miles of hot mix paving and just over 12 miles of cold mix paving. A total of 132 miles were resurfaced, which makes up about 11 percent of all County roads.

The Department of Public Works also played a key role in the response to flooding damage in Gowanda in August. Sentz and his team helped clean up and reconstruct roads during the federally declared disaster, and negotiated with FEMA and the State Emergency Management Office for reimbursement.

Public Works was also awarded an efficiency grant from the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority to replace some County vehicles last year.

## Erie County Central Police Services Helped Numerous Agencies over Past Year

Forensic Chemists in the County's Crime Lab of Central Police Services (CPS) helped develop leads in a number of criminal cases over the past year.

DNA analysts in CPS investigated 12 cold cases during 2009. Critical information was provided in the 1975 homicide of Michelle Dixon, which led Buffalo Police to arrest Bernard Thomas, who is awaiting trial.

Four analysts provided critical testimony in the successful prosecution of Byron Howard for a double homicide and arson case.

Another scientist provided trace evidence analysis in a hit and run case that resulted in severe injuries to two victims in Amherst. The analysis led to an eventual arrest and guilty plea.

In November, a site manager in the finger print lab re-worked fingerprint analysis from a 1991 homicide of a 77 year old woman. Two of the prints matched a recent addition to the statewide database. The information was given to the Buffalo Police Cold Case Squad.

Fingerprint analysts also helped police in Buffalo identify a serial burglar. Print analysis in another case led to the arrest of a suspect in a Town of Tonawanda break-in.



*ECIDA Vice Chairman Phil Corwin, County Executive Chris Collins, Environment and Planning Commissioner Kathy Konst and ECIDA COO Al Cuilliton speak at the press conference announcing "Your Growth is Our Business".*

## ECIDA Launches "Your Growth is Our Business" Program

The Erie County Industrial Development Agency launched a new initiative last month to help business owners maximize their potential.

The "Your Growth is Our Business" program is designed to ensure that businesses development needs are met by identifying resource partners with relevant programs at the federal, state and local level.

More information about the program is available at <http://growth.ecidany.com>.

## Open Hearts and Hands

Many years ago, a unit of the Erie County Department of Social Services started a "giving tree" with gloves and mittens to donate to Friends of Night People.

Over the years, more staff members joined the effort and the activity expanded.

Donations now run the gamut from toys, clothing, and accessories to Christmas decorations and even snow shovels. In 2009, 20 boxes and five shopping bags were filled to the brim. Over the past 15 years, various charities have benefited from the staff's generosity. Dedicated volunteers give their time and energy to box up and deliver all of the gifts.





## **Leandra's Law Creates Tougher Penalties for Drunk Drivers**

Rachelle Cybulski, Erie County's Director of Probation, attended a press conference with other law enforcement officials to announce the creation of Leandra's Law.

Under the new law, which went into effect December 18, first time offenders caught driving while intoxicated or impaired by drugs, with a child younger than 16 in the vehicle, may be charged with a Class E felony punishable by up to four years in prison. Courts also must order those convicted of DWI to install and maintain an ignition interlock device on any vehicle owned or operated by the driver for at least six months.

Additionally, individuals charged with driving with a blood alcohol level of .08 or higher and with a child in the vehicle will automatically have their license suspended pending prosecution.

People who drive while intoxicated or impaired by drugs and cause the death of a child younger than 16 in the car may be charged with a Class B felony, punishable by up to 25 years in prison. Drivers who are intoxicated or impaired and cause serious physical injury to a child in the vehicle may be charged with a Class C felony, punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Parents, guardians and custodians who are charged with driving while intoxicated or impaired by drugs while their child is a passenger in the car will be reported to the statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

Starting August 15, 2010, Courts must order all drivers convicted of a misdemeanor or felony DWI to install and maintain an ignition interlock device on any vehicle they own or operate for at least six months. New York will join 14 other states with across-the-board mandatory interlock laws when this provision of Leandra's Law takes effect.

More information about preventing drunk driving is available through Erie County's Stop DWI office at <http://www.erie.gov/stopdwi/>.

### **Coming next issue:**

- **Details about the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy**
- **Preparing for Women's History Month**

## **Department of Mental Health Announces \$4.7 Million in HUD Renewals for 2010**

On December 23, 2009, the Erie County Department of Mental Health (ECDMH) received notice of over \$4.7 million dollars in housing funding from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These dollars are part of the financial support system for over 500 slots of housing specifically designated for homeless and mentally ill individuals who reside in Erie County.

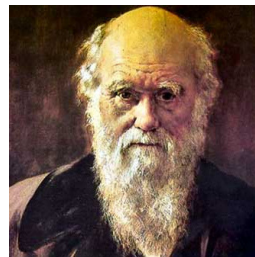
The ECDMH has received HUD funding since 1995 in its efforts to assist the county's homeless population. The agencies that contract through the ECDMH provide rental subsidies and case management follow-up in the community to assure safe and affordable housing is made available to the highest need mental health consumers. In addition, the ECDMH provides over \$1.2 million in matching funds on an annual basis to support these community efforts.

Overall, the Local Continuum of Care, coordinated by the Homeless Alliance of Western New York, secured over \$7.6 million dollars in HUD renewal funding for 2010.

Congratulations to the ECDMH and Homeless Alliance for all their efforts in securing this important funding.

## **Buffalo and Erie County Public Library Showcases Darwin**

The Buffalo and Erie County Public Library at Lafayette Square in downtown Buffalo is hosting an exhibit called "Darwin: The Origin of Influence" through February 12. The exhibit is set up in the Rare Book Room.



On Sunday, January 31, at 2 p.m., the Library will play the 1960 Oscar-nominated film "Inherit the Wind" starring Spencer Tracy. The movie concerns the teaching of evolution. Local author Gary Earl Ross will host a discussion following the movie.

On Saturday, February 6, from noon to 4 p.m., the Library will host a "Wild Things!" family activity day featuring the Buffalo Zoo and Buffalo Audubon Society. NPR Science journalist Ira Flatow will be there at 2 p.m. to answer questions.

## Erie County to be a “Promise Zone” for Urban Education

Erie County was selected by the New York State Office of Mental Health as one of three communities to participate in the New York Promise Zones for Urban Education initiative. The Erie County Department of Mental Health and the Buffalo Public School District (BPS), along with Syracuse and New York City, were selected as Promise Zone sites based on a state and national review of best practices for implementing successful school programs in high need and challenged communities.

The project framework is designed to formalize partnerships between selected school districts and state and local child/adult serving agencies. They hope to create learning environments that engage students so that they are on task and ready to learn. Participation in the pilot between the Buffalo Public School District, Erie County Department of Mental Health and other community service providers could help project organizers develop a model for other schools and health agencies around the state to use. Locally, while the Promise Zone initiative is in the formative stages, Spectrum Human Services, a contract agency of the ECDMH, will be working with parents and students identified by the BPS to provide crisis clinical care coordination services.

Department of Mental Health staff, John Grieco and Lynn Kaczmarowski and Buffalo Public School administrators are collaborating to develop a Community Services and Support Network to assist families in finding quick access to the right service at the right time.

## Senior Services Website Widely Used



In 2009, the Department of Senior Services website, [www.erie.gov/depts/seniorservices](http://www.erie.gov/depts/seniorservices) had more than 250,000 hits to their pages and pages of helpful information and resources.

Senior Services has a wealth of information available for our community's older adults, families and caregivers covering a range of topics. Staff can answer questions about housing, safety,

living independently, financial issues, caregiver concerns, health and wellness, nutrition, volunteering and events, health insurance, safe driving, long term care planning and options, and much more.

Although the website features extensive resources for an increasingly web-savvy audience, people without access or uncomfortable using the web can still utilize all the Department's knowledge of services and programs by calling **858-8526**.

## Erie County's Director of Veterans Services Teaching Course at Daemen College

The Daemen College Department of Social Work is offering a new course titled, “Issues and Challenges in Working with Veterans and Military Families.” Patrick W. Welch, Ph.D., Director of the Erie County Veterans Service Agency, will be the instructor. The course is offered on the Daemen campus for the spring 2010 semester. For more information on this new course, contact Renee Daniel, Chair, Department of Social Work at 839-8292 or [rdaniel@daemen.edu](mailto:rdaniel@daemen.edu).

“Last spring the Daemen Social Work Department sponsored an event that brought attention to the needs of veterans and their families,” said Renee Daniel, Associate Professor & Chair, Daemen Social Work Department. “Many of the comments from individuals who attended that event indicated we needed to have more courses that addressed the issues and needs of military families. The creation of this new course, on working with the many challenges faced by military families, brought about by repeated combat deployments, is a step in that direction.”

Most recently, in an effort to assist all veterans of U.S. military service in obtaining an education – with a focus on those returning from active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan – Daemen College and the Erie County Veterans Service Agency signed an agreement, connecting the Erie County Veterans Office with Daemen. The agreement designates Daemen College as a military friendly campus, assisting veterans in applying benefits received through the G.I. Bill.

Veterans interested in learning more about educational benefits available through the New York State Veterans Tuition Award, the Montgomery G.I. Bill, or other resources, should contact the Erie County Veterans Service Agency (716) 858-6363, or visit [www.erie.gov/veterans](http://www.erie.gov/veterans).

## Don't Miss Erie County Winterfest!

The Erie County Parks Department is proud to present Winterfest again this year on Sunday, January 31, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Chestnut Ridge Park.

Winterfest will feature sledding, snow shoe hikes, snowboarding, snow sculpting, tobogganing and much more.

A schedule of events is available at [www.erie.gov/parks](http://www.erie.gov/parks).